

Examined Life: Xiaoqiong Zheng's Story and Mine

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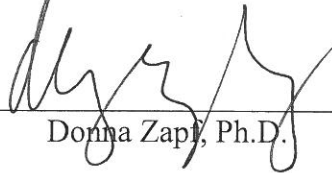
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## Examined Life: Xiaoqiong Zheng's Story and Mine

### Part One:

#### Who is Xiaoqiong Zheng?

Zheng Xiaoqiong was born in 1980 in Nanchong city, southwest China's Sichuan Province. After graduation from a nursing school and a short stint in a local hospital, she left for Dongguan, a coastal city in south China's Guangdong Province in 2001 to make her life as a migrant worker (Xiaoqiong Zheng).<sup>1</sup> Dongguan ranks behind only Shenzhen

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1. The nursing school education she received was a post-junior high school degree, inferior to a college degree in the hierarchy of the Chinese education system. The hospital was having financial difficulty and could not keep up with salary payments.

in exports among cities of Guangdong. In addition to being an important manufacturing hub, the city has also earned a reputation as the "sex capital of China."

In those years, a law called Custody and Repatriation, was still in place, authorizing the police (usually in cities) to detain people if they did not have a residence permit (hukou) or temporary residence permit (zanzhuzheng), and return them to their place of birth, usually rural areas (Custody and Repatriation).<sup>2</sup> For people who newly arrived in Dongguan, interrogation and even beatings by the police were a common phenomenon. Therefore, her greatest fear in the first months was the police.

In an interview with the weekly newspaper South Weekend, Zheng said that to avoid being checked during sleep, she would ask the neighbors to lock her door from the outside every night in the first days. When the police came knocking on the door at midnight, she did not dare to make the slightest sound (Zheng, Tingxin).

In her job search, Zheng encountered several illegal factories and was cheated by some of them. She was in despair.

In the same interview, she said that "At that time, it was hard to find a job, let

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2. It was abolished in 2003, after an incident that involved the tragic death of a top university graduate named Zhigang Sun, who traveled to Guangzhou city for work, was detained by police for not carrying ID and beaten to death during his custody.

alone a good one. Two hundred people would line up for two or three vacancies. The factory manager asked us to run and do sit-ups to see how physically strong we were. There was no personal dignity to speak of. We had to do whatever we were asked to.”

She found work in a furniture factory. When she received her first monthly salary of 45 dollars, she was bitterly disappointed. The salary was nothing compared to the debt her parents had taken on to pay for her education.

Later, she was hired to work in a metal factory, where she would continue to be employed for four years, the first two of which were spent on the assembly line.

The metal factory allowed each worker to leave the factory only three times a week. Once, Zheng used up her time allowance and therefore had to speak to a visiting friend across the iron gate. Each worker on the assembly line was called by their worker's ID number rather than their name. Zheng was “No. 245.” Everyday, she punched a total of more than ten thousand holes in iron sheets with the aid of an ultrasound punching machine, repeating the actions of placing a two to three pound iron sheet in the right position, pressing the machine switch, removing the iron sheet and then placing a new one. Callouses quickly grew on her hands.

Once, her thumbnail was cut off by machinery on the assembly line and she was taken to the hospital. There, she met other patients with more horrible injuries, their moaning keeping her awake at night. In an interview, she remembers the time when a

fellow worker injured his finger; their boss insisting that they wait for the company car to take him to the hospital in half an hour, rather than taking the worker himself with his own new car. The worker was not in a hurry himself, hoping to get a few hundreds dollars more in compensation if his finger could not be cured easily. Even after many years, she was still worked up talking about it: "Those machines can press one's hand into garlic spread. It is not all our fault; many times, those outdated machines forced us put our hands a little too deep."

The return for these risky and hard jobs was merely subsistence-level income. Most factories paid a monthly salary of around one hundred dollars back then; Zheng's was less. She still tried to save, and spent less than ten dollars a month.

During those years on the assembly line, Zheng stumbled on poems by migrant workers in a magazine, and began to write herself. Her pent-up soul needed an outlet. "At the factory, I worked for over 10 hours a day. And I still spent my time after work reading and writing. I persisted in doing that because I have dreams, and poems became my salvation," she said. "For a long period of time, I saw those poems on the paper as my real home."

Soon, she began to publish her poems in literary magazines. But what brought Zheng fame was an essay titled "Iron & Plastic Factory" that won her an award in 2007 in the essay category of the People's Literary Awards, which was organized by the People's Literature Publishing House. The writing of the essay, to a large extent, was

triggered by her finger accident.

The judging panel's comment on her essay was that it "directly enters the scene of migrant workers' work and life, gives a true representation of a sensitive worker amid a modern industrial workshop, reveals the reality and metaphor of iron and plastic, and provides personal illustration to the reflection and questioning of the imperfection and inhumanity of the modern industrial system (Pan, Qinyi)."

The South Weekend profile of Zheng cites her award acceptance speech, which won her a big round of applause: "When my fingernail was cut off by the machine, I was filled with the fear of machines and life as a migrant worker, a fear that extended from my body to my soul... When I read in the newspaper that there are more than 40,000 severed finger accidents in the Pearl River Delta every year, I tried to calculate if these fingers are placed in a straight line, how long it would be, and how this line is continuously being extended. However, the words I wrote are powerless. They cannot rejoin a single severed finger. Nevertheless, I keep telling myself I have to write them down, and to record my feelings."

Zheng's fellow workers still have no idea they are working next to an award-winning poet. According to Zheng herself, they do not read, do not care about the world outside the factory, they only watch TV or drop off to sleep after work (Cheng, Xi).

It is the same with her parents, states Zheng: if she told her parents that she is

writing poetry, the first thing they would ask is can you make money from it? She feels still that she is unable to answer such a question. She plans to send home part of the 1,500 dollars of award money from the People's Literature award, but she still cannot tell her parents how she got it (Jin, Ying).

Part Two: A Translation of “*Iron*,” Part One of Zheng’s *People’s Literature* Award-Winning Essay “*Iron and Plastic Factory*”

***Iron***

(Published in the *People’s Literature*, China’s first literary magazine)<sup>3</sup>

*My knowledge of iron began with a stint in a rural hospital. The country was fragile and soft, like clay. Iron often cut the country with its hardness and coldness, and the country hurt. Diseases, like sharp iron, penetrated the country’s fragile body; I have more than once witnessed the country silently sobbing from the attacking diseases. Whenever I passed by the rural hospital, its dark iron gate gave me the creeps. It was dull and monstrous, sinking and floating all at once, like a diseased body. When the wind blew, one could sense the fragile country crying right outside the iron gate. Diseases*

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3. Zheng, Xiaoqiong. “*Iron and Plastic Factory*.” *People’s Literature*. May 2007. Web. <http://www.rmwxzz.com/rmwx/xlc/200705/12803.html>



*traveled on the country roads and fields like a ghost and knocked into people, whose homes' bright lights would gradually dim. They struggled and died out, their throats severed by the iron-like diseases, their lives sunk in a world of silent pain. After six months, unable to endure the nothing-can-be-done-about dullness, I headed south.*

*In the south, I was hired by a metal factory, where I worked in a world of iron: iron machine tables, iron parts, iron drills, iron products, and iron stands. Here, I saw pieces of hard iron become deformed and distorted by force; they were cut, bifurcated, drilled, curled, turned into products of whatever shapes, sizes and thicknesses people needed them to be. I worked on the lathe in the beginning, cutting sleek and shiny iron bars into pieces of crude screw taps. A long iron bar of about a dozen meters was placed in an automatic lathe, and held in position by clamps on its left and right, top and bottom, and front and back. The numerical control lathe moved back and forth. The iron bars were cut by the sharp lathe tool, and then shredded into rings of thin and lustrous iron, which fell off under the dripping cooling oil, broke up into smaller pieces, and sunk to the bottom of the plastic tub.*

*I had always been very sensitive to the piercing sound of iron cutting. It filled me with fear, a fear that originated from my deep-rooted trust in the hardness of iron from childhood. Watching the glinting sparks and the iron being cut amid the sound of oxygen-arc cutting, however, I realized that iron, which I thought to be a very tough material, was actually so fragile. Facing the oxygen-arc cutting, I felt as if the shrill sound emanated from my bones; the heavy cutting machine seemed to be cutting my flesh and*

*soul slowly and piece by piece. The sound was evocative of sharp pain, like the blinding splashing sparks. For quite a long time, I stubbornly believed that the dissonant and fragmentary sound was the protest and yelling of the iron as it broke. However, in the metal factory, moistened with the heavy cooling oil, iron was broken, split, and ground into cone shapes so noiselessly. The twelve-meter long bars were cut into 4-5cm crude screw taps, which were neatly put in boxes. I could no longer hear the iron's shrill cries nor see the splashing sparks in the whole process. Once, I touched the turning tool by accident, and half of my thumbnail was gone without a sound. Pain, nothing but sharp pain, ran along the finger, and penetrated my flesh and bones. Blood flowed with the cooling oil. My coworkers took me to the hospital. In the hospital, I found out that there were so very many injured people, most of whom were migrant workers like myself. Some of them hurt their fingers, some whole hands, some legs and heads. They were wrapped up in white gauze soaked in blood.*

*I lay on a bed full of the smell of disinfectant. It was a six-bed room; to my left was a plastic factory worker with a head injury; to my right, a mold factory worker with three broken fingers. Each person's family gathered around their beds, looking anxious. The one with three broken fingers kept moaning and seemed to be really suffering. A doctor came over, hung the I.V. bottle and the needle, gave instructions about medication, and left. He was expressionless the whole time. Looking at the gauze, which had turned yellowish from red, I was suddenly reminded of the iron that I worked with every day, the gauze was dark brown, exactly the color of iron rust. To his family, his pain was so sharp and poignant, like the iron under the welding machine. The pain,*

*intense and loud, penetrating to the bones and soul, would cast a shadow in their lives. This man came from the countryside of Xinyang city of Henan province. I had no idea how he was going to make a living with three broken fingers when he returned to his hometown. He was still moaning in bed, his moaning reminded me of the sound of the welding machine from a repair shop in my home village in Sichuan province, the harsh sound filled up the country's peaceful and open sky, floating above people's heads like a ghostly atmosphere. In this town hospital, in this southern town of the industrial age, how insignificant were injuries like this. Sticking my head out the window, I saw wide roads, cars, crowds, billboards, factories with closed iron gates; it was a sight of peace and prosperity. No one did, and no one would care about one or more people's fingers getting eaten by a machine. No one did, or no one would hear their painful moaning. They, like the iron held in position by the automatic lathe controlled by me, were cut, split, polished by a tremendous force, all of which was done in silence.*

*The wound scabbed over, but my thumbnail was never as smooth and bright as it once was. It was rugged and mottled, like the result of a poor welding job. When I felt peaceful, I looked at this fingernail that grew out of pain, and which, like a monstrous thing grown out of the abyss, abruptly loomed in the deep recesses of my mind. I knew, it was the cumulation of the sharp pain; between the scraggy lines, fear lingered even after the pain had disappeared. The physical pain disappeared completely, but the sense of pain would not, still looming in the deep recesses of my mind. In those quiet nights with no one to turn to for comfort, I looked at my injured finger, and brooded over its related details. I seemed to hear the welding sound from the repair shop in my hometown, the*

*hissing sound of iron cutting becoming louder and louder. What I heard was only a part of the sound; more had been buried in the flesh, in the pain that scabbed, and in even deeper places. There, what had disappeared signaled its existence through its reflection in my thinking, condensed on my finger and in my poetry, and became even harder.*

*I wrote my first poem after I came to the south; to be precise, after my finger injury. Because of the injury, I had to take a break from work. In the hospital, I gradually calmed down, and got used to the gauze that wrapped up my hand after two days. I began to think, because I had never had the luxury of such slow-paced days, and such extended and free time. I sat in the bed and kept thinking, what if I broke several fingers, like the patient in the next bed? What if I had a worse injury next time? This kind of hypothetical thinking filled me with fear, a fear that stemmed from the realization that we simply could not control our own fate, that too many chance events could destroy our ideas and thoughts in a minute. I kept asking myself questions, listening to the voice within me, and wrote everything down on paper. As I was writing, I felt a slight vibration within, a certain preexisting power in my body gradually awakened to the pain of my injured nail. Like a train parked in my body for a long time, it began to run on tracks of pain and thinking, dragging along its iron body and started moving continuously.*

*I had always wanted to fill my poetry with the taste of iron, sharp and hard. Two years later, I was transferred from the machine table to the warehouse in the metal factory, responsible for guarding every day the iron ingots, small iron bars, sheet iron, iron chips, processed iron products of various shapes. I was surrounded by iron all over*

*the place. In my mind, the smell of iron was diffuse, hard, and felt heavy. I felt that the air of the warehouse had become heavier because of the iron. After working in the workshop two years, operating lathes and drilling, I had gradually acquired new understanding of iron. Iron was also soft, fragile; it could be drilled, slotted, engraved, bent, folded – it was as soft as clay, it was lonely, and silent. I often watched for a long time how a piece of iron changed in the fire. After I put a heap of raw iron in the heat treater, the pale and shiny iron gradually turned red, its original chilling brightness became transparent and aglow. I watched the glowing iron turn red, transparent red, as transparent as tears; it made me cry, a drop of tear fell on the hot iron, and soon disappeared. Until this day I stubbornly believe that that drop of tear did not evaporate at the high temperature, but fell onto the hot iron, and became part of it. Tears are the world's hardest material; they have a soft but all-conquering power. The fire got redder, the smell of burning iron stronger; the iron, like a burning firewood, was transformed into a streak of red glowing light, like flowers blossoming in the fire. I watched. Its solid form gradually melted; it became a liquid fire, gaseous light, absorbed in vastness and emptiness. It shined steadily, and constantly shifted to conquer the rest of the iron that was not yet aflame.*

*But across the iron flames, I felt the expressions of the workers around me were always so vague. An unknown force distorted our originally clear faces... our faces only exhibited broken light, lit up for a short moment, and what was left behind were ashes, old, confused, like piles of abandoned scrap iron in the open wasteyard.*

*I became sensitive and fragile in life, little by little; my heart was like a piece of*

*iron softened by the burning fire. And all of a sudden, the things around me were covered with thorns, which constantly jarred my sensitive and fragile heart, and it hurt. I saw one after another the workers; they came and went, disappearing into the crowd in the end. They left me nothing but their different expressions: warm, cold, helpless, angry, anxious, depressed, numb, meditative, relaxed, confused; these expressions came from Hunan province, Hubei province, Sichuan province, Chongqing, Anhui province, Guizhou province, and I did not know where they went. All the encounters, conversations, memories we shared were like the small sparks during iron cutting that soon died out. The subtle and persistent feelings we used to have in our encounters slowly faded away like a runaway train, leaving only vague memories that kept replaying in my mind like the train whistles. They came and went, as rootless as I was. They neither took away anything from me, nor left me anything. Whatever eager anticipation, agitating and fantasizing sensations I used to have in our encounters, conversations and interactions, were to be stranded in the open wilderness, like pieces of rusty iron. Time was swarming up through the narrow, winding sound of watches, slowly making inroads into the piece of iron like rust stains, until it covered it all up, leaving a blur of red-brown rust, which grew deeper and deeper, and disappeared eventually.*

*Dried blood crusted on my fingernail like rusty iron; my mouth tasted like blood. When I was working in the rural hospital, I used to deal with patients, wounds and blood everyday, but back then I never associated blood with iron rust. At the metal factory, I kept sensing a taste of rust; it was damp and hot, slightly sweet, and salty. I sat on the bed and looked at the scabbed fingernail; it was like the naked steel bar outside the iron-*

*covered factory that slowly eroded and scarred in the rain.*

*The life of a migrant worker itself is like an acid rain, slowly eroding our body, soul, ideals, dreams, but not a heart of liquid, which was stronger than steel. I removed the hot iron from the heat treater and put it in the coolant, the pungent smell of hardening iron shot up into my nostrils and lungs, intractable and resistant. In my mind, I have always thought of the hardening process as iron wounding and scabbing as it is quenched in the coolant, and the strong smell as its blood, sticky, raw and hot.*

*A friend once wrote in a poem, life in the south as a migrant worker was a huge melting pot. Two years later, when writing about the migrant worker's life, iron was still what I wrote the most about. I no longer felt the same excitement and eager anticipation when I first came here, but I was not disappointed and frustrated like others were either; I only felt peaceful. I kept trying to record my true feelings about a migrant worker's life with words. It was always so bright and sharp, like burning iron, which roasted my body and soul. I knew that the reality of migrant workers' lives was not only about those at the bottom like me, but also management on the higher levels; however, I could not escape the reality I was in. This specific context determined that pain was the single perspective of my writing.*

*Amid such a huge fire, I kept feeling a sharp pain surging and writhing from deep within. It kept convulsing between my body and soul, running like a beast, mixing and accumulating with all the disappointments in my life as a migrant worker. The pain was*

*enormous and impossible to get rid of, like a piece of iron lying across the throat. It began to take over the position that once was occupied by ideals and lofty things, the place that I used to yearn for was slowly deserted. Overwhelmed, I stood on the edge of the swamp, time fell like the iron dust on the machine table, leaving darkness wavering in my heart. I did not know whether, in the fire of the migrant worker's life, I was a failed iron or something that only had the appearance of iron and was in fact burnt up like sulfur.*

*I could see my youth slipping away; I lived a life of constant moving from one industrial area to another, not knowing where the next stop was. Time's hands dug furrows on my forehead. They were small now but I knew they would gradually connect and line up neatly, digging a huge canal in my body before long. Time, in my mind, took on an old black color, like that of the factories in the distant industrial zones, dark, dank and a little melancholy; it kept telling me about the rusting iron, the failed iron at the corner of the building, its faint voice trembling in my heart.*

*Pain, like a ten horsepower iron, impacts the fate of migrant workers. From the injured and scabbed-over fingernail, a tremendous power distilled, making me rethink my fate. The howl of a piece of iron was not so harsh in the hubbub of the southern industrial city as in the country; drowned in the gloss and glitter, only a sigh, as calm as iron, was left. The wound congested and swelled, silent pain kept torturing my mind, which was as light as white paper. I tried to be forgiving in life, to observe and reflect on the reality from another perspective than that of a migrant worker at the bottom, but despite all my*



*efforts, I could not forget the pain within my deepest self. I was away from the workshop, away from the risk of having my fingers eaten by the machine any minute, but the shadow of risk often fell on me in my sleep. I dreamt more than ten times that my left hand's index finger was destroyed. Every time I woke up from my dreams, I would open the window, and look into the night sky, and the trees, a world covered up in iron gray. Iron was iron after all, hard, sharp, it had the outward look of the night, whereas my body and soul were so fragile. Yes, I could not forgive the sense of repression and fear it created in me and in my poetry. The scar on my thumbnail took root deep in my heart like a piece of iron, which, with its intense penetrating power, spread, and permeated my blood and body. It was howling, making me feel the weight of my soul in the long years. I soldiered on.*

### Part Three:

#### A Brief Analysis of “Iron,” the Central Metaphor of Zheng’s Essay

Several critics have pointed out the significance of the metaphor “iron” in Zheng’s writing. For example, Beijing Normal University professor of Literature Qinghua Zhang writes that “if Zheng’s poetry has a unique aesthetic importance, its most salient metaphoric extension would be the way she offers the cold, hard, new aesthetics of iron to our age (Zhang, Qinghua); Sun Yat-sen University professor of Literature

Youshun Xie writes that:

*“‘Iron’ is the core element in Zheng’s writing, one of the most imaginative and penetrating literary symbols created by her ... the imagery of ‘Iron’ keeps expanding, becomes far-reaching. But the crowd at the bottom, being squeezed by the “iron”, is tiny and isolated. However great shame and pain it feels is to be easily obliterated by the industrial regime represented by ‘Iron’... ‘Iron’ has become a symbol. It is cold, lacking the temperature of humanity, indestructible, is in every corner of the modern factory life; once made into all kinds of industrial products and entered into trade, it becomes more valuable than living people in the eyes of the capitalists; it forms alliance with machinery, the work cards, the system, and takes on harsh and unoffendable power; it is a spike inserted in the soul of an injured worker, and hurts every time it is touched.”*

Iron is hard and cruel, therefore, it is used to describe disease and torture: “their throats severed by the iron-like diseases, their lives sunk in a world of silent pain,” “The pain was enormous and impossible to get rid of, like a piece of iron lying across the throat.”

In a setting of the workshop, iron is overpowered by the industrial machines and is now the vulnerable underclass: “I saw pieces of hard iron become deformed and distorted by force; they were cut, bifurcated, drilled, curled, turned into products of whatever shapes, sizes and thicknesses people needed them to be.” The poet identifies with iron; her pain for the injured iron is palpable.

Iron is ubiquitous in Zheng’s world: “I worked in a world of iron: iron machine tables, iron parts, iron drills, iron products, and iron stands.” The imagery of iron is omnipresent in her world, too: “Every time I woke up from my dreams, I would open the window, and look into the night sky, and the trees, a world covered up in iron gray.” Her life and iron become homogenous. Iron, a basic industrial material, thus keeps attaching

new layers of meanings in Zheng's imagination and writing, and becomes a metaphor that is rich, profound, spiritual and magic.

As Qinghua Zhang says, he senses an "innate temperament of darkness" in her language (Zhang, Qinghua). The solemn, dark and seemingly laughterless feel of her world reminds me of Kafka's works.

The spotlight of critical reception on her writing constantly points to her status as a migrant worker. She "directly enters the scene of migrant workers' work and life," as the comment by the Award Judging Panel points out. This status lends her writing of migrant workers' life the authenticity that cannot be acquired otherwise. From the beginning, the literariness and the social function are inseparable in the interpretation of her work.

The subject matter of Zheng's poetry, about migrant workers' lives, draws two opposite views regarding its value. On the one side is the academic school, pure poetry, elitist writers and critics, who hold the view that migrant workers at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder like Zheng are not fit for writing poetry. They criticize that Zheng's poetry is too close to reality, raw, crude and not "elegant," calm and objective. On the other side, however, are supporters of Zheng, who rave about the fact that her works reveal a different life and a different China that has been hidden from the public sight.

For example, Youshun Xie compares Zheng's writing to the works of other writers of the post-'80 generation, who have only urban memories and fundamentally different life experience and spiritual outlook: "She constantly reminds us that, in addition to life of luxury portrayed by her contemporaries, there is another life, a life shared by a large number of the population with weak voice and painful expression, waiting for the writers to describe, to claim: in their generation's lives, beside the stories of falling in and out of love, there are stories of hunger, blood, tears and fear; their life setting is not only campus, bars and offices, but also factories, assembly lines and iron sheds; their memories of youth includes stories of not only love, video games, but also back pay, and the bloodiness of 'close to forty thousand severed fingers a year.' [...] If writers invariably write about a luxurious life, and collectively remain silent to another life, behind this trend of writing is actually hidden the violence of writing - it turns another life into a colony of luxury living." (Xie, Youshun)

Another critic, Shiqiang Wang, a researcher at the Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences, writes that

*"Compared to the triumphant, magnificent mainstream narrative, the world in Zheng's works is indeed "another China": unemployment, layoffs, injuries, severed fingers, petition, assembly line, rental housing, occupational diseases, temporary residence permits ... perhaps, we should not say the mainstream narrative of a fast modernizing China is untrue, and the "other China" in Zheng's writing is; a more appropriate view is that they are both true, and are different sides of the same coin. However, in reality the presence of the former is too strong, it is the only encouraged and legitimate narrative, and this "other" is severely marginalized, resulting in a serious imbalance. Meanwhile, the "other China" is closer to the lives and emotions of a large number of individuals, and it is not an exaggeration to say it has a greater authenticity for the individual. When talking about Zheng's poetry, we should first acknowledge its revelation of "another China," another life, and another reality. Therein lies the significance of her writing." (Wang, Shiqiang)*

Several critics raise the sensitive question: who made Xiaoqiong Zheng? Why is she recognized by different groups that do not necessarily see eye-to-eye on things, i.e. the government, the academia, and the general public?

China's economic growth over the last three decades is built on the back of cheap labor. As Richard Swift writes in "Whose Miracle?":

*"In 2009, Time magazine named the young migrant workers of China as a kind of collective runner-up 'Person of the Year,' crediting them for being the fuel of China's economic miracle. The model of the Chinese economy is based on workers putting in a 12-hour day for just 2.7 per cent of what their US counterparts would make to produce the same low-cost goods on sale at the local Walmart or high-end computer store...In a provocative formulation, the Chinese sociologist Ho-fung Hung characterized China's role in the world as being that of America's Head Servant. By this view there is a coalition of interests between the export capitalists and their political allies in the Chinese Communist Party and the giants that dominate the US (and global) retail consumer market. Hung characterizes this relationship as "partners in crime." (Swift, Richard)*

The draconian labor conditions, as reflected in Zheng's account of her personal experience – lax health and safety, increases in work demand without compensating pay increases, fear of police raids on migrant communities, etc. – are an open secret.

As Shiqiang Wang notes, the mainstream narrative is one that is triumphant and positive, touting the familiar facts such as China's double-digit GDP growth and its rise to being the world's second largest economy. Both domestic and international media collude in this kind of hype and selective showcasing of reality, turning their collective eyes away from another reality that is unsightly, inconvenient, and unhappy, the on-the-ground reality of thousands of migrant workers like Zheng. As the saying goes, half the

truth is often a great lie. The state-backed mainstream narrative, due to its selectiveness, is disingenuous and distorting.

Yet in recent years, China's cheap labor economic model is becoming harder to sustain as the rights consciousness of younger generations of migrant workers increases. The Internet is contributing to the empowerment of the people and has led to their demands that inequality issues be addressed. The Central Government in Beijing is starting to realize the social costs and resulting turmoil of the Economic Miracle and is showing signs of re-balancing its market enthusiasms. In this context, Zheng's recognition could be interpreted as the working of a compensation mechanism. Zheng represents a group to which the state owes its stellar economic growth.

#### Part Four:

#### A Personal Interpretation of Zheng's Work

Growing up in a small and somewhat claustrophobic town with a primitive economy, I am no stranger to the sight of townspeople struggling to make a living. Every morning, on my way to school, I passed by peddlers occupying both sides of the street, who either squatted or sat on a little stool, their produce haphazardly piled or carefully

arranged on a piece of cloth spread on the ground in front of them, which they must have picked from their land before dawn and transported to the market using a carrying pole. Behind them are shops, including some hair salons. I remember glimpsing either good or plain looking girls brushing their teeth or washing their hair in front of the shops at odd hours. Past the makeshift market was a breakfast area with dozens of stalls selling an array of breakfast options: small steamed buns, deep-fried pancakes, noodles, etc, etc. One could get by with two cents worth of food.

My senior high school, the best one in town, was right next to the breakfast stalls. Or the reverse is true: the breakfast stalls chose to be next to the school. Senior high school was a three-year tunnel of darkness with promised light at the end for those good students who scored high in the College Entrance Exam. Students, based on their school performance, were divided into various grades and ranks: students at the top, who were driven to perform well and were the teachers' favorites; students at the bottom, who were blasé and who already knew school was not for them; others, who were deemed smart and could perform well, but did not strive to, like my close friend, who I addressed by the letter X and who addressed me by Y in our correspondence, and myself. Teachers and students of the first group often kept a wary eye on those of the latter two groups, as if we were morally suspect.

It was the late nineties, when the massive wave of the Internet revolution swept into our small town. Internet cafes sprung up like mushrooms. Underage students almost constituted almost their entire customer base. Regulations had not caught up yet; there

were no IDs checked. X and I were quickly hooked by the Internet with its infinite supply of music, literature, and Internet friends all over the country to connect with. We skipped all high school classes that were skippable. The classroom was a cage that we took every opportunity to be released from and fly into the world of the Internet.

We were not alone; we were among the very first generation of “Internet junkies” in our hometown, where, in the years to come, before it would eventually be accepted among teachers and parents, the Internet would continue to bear the imputation of poison and “bad influence” to youngsters.

An increasing number of students outside of the “good students” group jumped on the Internet bandwagon and, especially during “less important” classes, took mass flight to the Internet café, leaving a gaping hole of deserted seats in the otherwise packed classroom of around eighty seats. Then, at some point, the teachers “duly” informed parents, including mine, of those “intractable offenders.” My father, a loyal member of the Communist Party of China, had already ended his not so successful career as a clerk in an agricultural cooperative – the type of economic organization that no longer existed – and was a “full time Dad” at the time. With all the free time on his hands, he frequently went to the school to check whether I was there, and would start raiding every Internet café in town whenever he found out I was missing. It turned into a guerrilla war between us. I had a couple of narrow escapes, at the last minute being notified by classmates who saw him coming. But I was not always so lucky. Once, he followed me secretly into an Internet café and slapped me across my head as I was logging on to my instant messenger



in high spirits. Another time, he caught me again and ordered me to go home with him. I was frightened, seeing the blue veins bulging from his forehead. I saw a beating coming.

I was beaten only once after my parents discovered my Internet addiction. The beating occurred following the time that I was slapped in the Internet café and ordered home. I was grabbed by my hair and tossed to the ground by my father. The next time, when I saw his veins bulging, was not long after. So the horror was fresh.

I decided on the spot to run away, and I did, to a neighboring town. I spent the night in an Internet café. The next day, my parents hunted me down and brought me home. They told me that they would not beat me this time, and they never did again.

Back then, when a student was astray, a blame game would start: parents and teachers would hunt for the “bad influence.” X and I, for example, were accused of being “bad influences” on each other by our respective parents. As a result, we were asked to keep away from each other by them. X and I always laughed at the term “bad influence.”

The individualistic Chinese writer Dai Zhang, who lived in Ming Dynasty in the 17th century, famously said that “People not addicted to anything are not worthy friends, because they lack passion; people not obsessed about anything are not worthy friends, because they lack vitality.” X and I shared a budding individuality and wide-eyed curiosity about the world and about ourselves, and bonded over it. Our relationship was one based on our deep identification with each other rather than on circumstances.

Between what others wanted us to be and what we ourselves wanted to do, the choice was clear to us.

We were aesthetes, determined to turn our back on the authorities – i.e., teachers, parents, whoever tried to coax us into turning ourselves into automatons in exchange for a comfortable future – and to follow our own heart's direction in finding bliss, light, and nourishment. This was the period during which I started listening to rock n' roll music, X had a crush on a pretty boy in a classroom two floors down from us, and we both had tense relationship with our parents.

This was the year a female politics teacher, who “taught” her students by just reading to us what was written in the textbook, once referred to X and me as the two “oddballs” of the class.

This was the time I repeatedly reminded myself of Janis Joplin's words: “Don't compromise yourself. You are all you've got.”

X had another different way of seeing it: Years later, as we reunited in a big city, sitting in a kebab restaurant and smoking, she said that we were the two smart people of the class. Later, she sent me a message: “Wisdom is doomed with a broken heart; devotion, an early death.”

X said that she never regretted anything.

X said that the people of our hometown were kind of uptight (maybe because most were not well-off).

We left at the first opportunity, i.e. when we went to college, and never returned.

But looking back at that time from the perspective of an adult, I must also flesh out this story by admitting what I could not recognize at the time. I was delinquent in my high school years – skipping school a whole lot of the time, cheating my parents for money, running away from home – in spite of my parents' best efforts. Like the poem says: cut running water with a sword, it will faster flow.

At the end of high school, my college entrance exam was predictably unexciting, but enough to get me into a four-year college away from home, which was really all that I cared about. Between my limited choices, my parents and I together decided on a second-tier college two hundred miles from my hometown. Fate played a joke on our family though: the school put a notice in the provincial newspaper, announcing that the entry score it published earlier was a mistake and replacing it with a slightly higher one. My score, as it turned out, fell under the updated entry score. As a result, I had to give it up. The only option left for me was a third-tier teachers college nine hundred miles away in Zhanjiang city, a third-tier coastal city in the southern Canton province. It was a downgrade in terms of school ranking, but I was excited because of the location in the developed Canton province, even though Zhanjiang city was on the periphery of the

province, both geographically and economically. Seeing no other choice, my parents begrudgingly accepted, while cursing the change of heart by the first college. The whole process appeared to me to be random and was therefore scary. I, who had never travelled more than one hundred miles from home, was going to live by myself in a far-flung city in a strange province. But I was adventurous; my drifting – or, should I say, my running away from home, albeit legitimate this time – started. From that point on, I only moved further and further away.

As the saying goes: “The mountains are high and the emperor is far away.” In college, out of the sphere of influence of my parents and left to my own devices, the ban on surfing the Internet was lifted. What was more, I was given money, intended to last me one full semester, meaning I was suddenly “rich” beyond imagination. The changes, it seemed, were a little too much.

Being a third-tier college, the school was bound to be largely mediocre; I expected that. What was surprising, and consequently disappointing, was that the diversity I’d experienced in my high school class – the good, the bad, and the in-between – was completely lacking among my sixty-odd classmates. Most of them were from surrounding areas and low-income households. They were homogenous and conforming. They were even about the same height. They diligently went to even the most boring classes, classes that preached about the greatness of our great dead leaders. No one ever skipped school. I remember seeing the flocks of them marching to classes, and it was always a somewhat frightening sight to me.

Those students knew what they wanted to be: elementary school teachers. They were content and not tortured by angst and doubt. I, on the contrary, had no intention of becoming a teacher, and especially after seeing them, my future cohorts, knew that I would never decide to become one.

As it turns out, they did not look forward to me becoming one either; one of them once said to me: “I don’t know whether I will want you to teach my kids.”

During this time, I was skipping and failing classes and smoking.<sup>4</sup> I moved out of the dorm. I shunned the other students, maybe vice versa, too.

In my third year my outrageous academic record finally caught the attention of the department heads. I gathered later that among them I had a bad reputation of being a female student who didn't behave and who didn't live on campus. They notified my parents, warning them about my possible suspension from the college. The next day my mother boarded a train to the city where my college was located. The ride was more than twenty hours.

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4. In China, women smoking are still frowned upon, especially in the less developed parts of the country.

I was scared as I stood outside the train station, waiting for my mother. What harsh words would she utter to me, what interrogation would she put me through, what punishment would she hand out? A throng emerged from the station. I searched for her face. I saw her. She looked both anxious and stern, timid and heroic. I walked up to her – to my huge surprise, she smiled at me the minute she saw me. It must have been an instinct, however, as she dropped her smile immediately, perhaps suddenly remembering what brought her there. So we walked together, communicating in silence.

My mother went directly to meet the powers that be of the department in which I was “studying”: the Dean, the Subdean and the Secretary, first in the college office, then in the privacy of their homes, where I hand delivered to each of them an envelope containing cash that she had prepared. She appealed to them for me, like a hen shielding chicks under her wings. We went through the humiliation together. Then they asked me to write a self-criticism. I wrote one and submitted it. They turned it down, saying it was not genuine enough. I made some “improvements” and submitted it again; they begrudgingly accepted it, saying it was still not good enough. The public crisis was over. I was not suspended.

My mother must have felt relieved that her diplomatic trip was successful. I was relieved too, totally unaware that another crisis, of a completely different nature, was in the making.

It was the third day of her trip. After lunch, I went to the train station to buy her

return ticket, as she was planning to leave the next day. On my way back to my apartment, I bought some local tropical fruits for her. When I arrived, I sensed something wasn't right. She looked pale, like someone at death's door, but she wouldn't tell me what had happened. Then I noticed that my room had been cleaned. My books, my papers on the table had been rearranged. I knew at once that she had examined everything and discovered a secret of mine. I felt so stupid. I was busy hiding my cigarettes before she came, but forgot the bigger secret. And now it was too late.

In the night I woke up and saw her sitting with her back against the wall, trying hard to subdue her sobbing. What could I say? I asked her to sleep, and she nodded, with difficulty. I think she lay down. I went back to sleep.

The next day, we went to the beach, which was less than an hour's bus ride away, before she left for home. She was sitting and I was lying on the lawn, avoiding her eyes. It was warm and breezy. She asked me who the man was. What she had found among my things was an abortion record. I used a false name when I went to the hospital, thinking I was being smart. But she knew it was me. I kept quiet. She never asked again.

My mother is very traditional. She told me later that she felt that she could no longer walk tall after that trip. So, after sharing the humiliation, we were now sharing the shame.

During those years, I spent more time outside campus than in the safe setting of

the classroom. I was thirsty for life. I was credulous, or just stupid, and in that mediocre and conservative city the odds of meeting good human beings were low. I had my bad experiences. C, my one and only true friend in college, told me that it was as though I never learned. Every time was like a new experience to me. I guess she was right. I was the kind of person who, when given a matchbox whose content was mostly wet, would keep striking new matches in the hope of finding one that was untainted and good, hoping for one flame that could restore my lost faith. I met waitresses, club dancers, corrupt officials, a real estate developer, and a professor who lusted for young and pretty female students. The exploiter and the exploited. I felt I could confidently say I had seen a bit of the world. That was what I told C: I wanted to see the world. I often relayed my stories and experiences to her, and it was she who accompanied me in my hospital visit. She read the whole time, even in the hospital waiting room. She was preparing for her graduate school exam; she said that she had wanted to leave the college the first day she arrived.

How much love, how much pain, how many nails  
Pin me to the machine table, blueprint, order form  
Early morning dew, midday's blood

Must have an iron nail to pin down overtime, industrial disease  
And the nameless grief follows, the time of the working class  
From the factory buildings unfolds an era of fortune and misery

How many exhausted shadows flash beneath the dull lamps  
How many emaciated, frail young working-class women smile numbly  
Their love and memory, like moss shaded by green trees, silent and vulnerable

How many soundless nails pass through their calm flesh  
Their youth flows with virtue and purity, separated from profit, back pay  
Labor law, homesickness, and an unknown love

The sky-blue assembly line dangles booth seats  
One painful nail at a time, a momentary stop



Outside the window, autumn passes by, someone right beside it lives

- *Iron Nails* by Xiaoqiong Zheng; translated by Jonathan Stalling (Stalling, Jonathan)

As I write this, it suddenly occurs to me that what strikes home to me about Zheng and her writing is her sensitivity, her pain, and her life of struggle. We are so close in age and in my own way, in a parallel space, I too have been struggling. I strongly relate to her experience as a migrant factory worker located at the bottom rung of the workforce. The bottom rung is a place with which I am familiar.

As I look back, I see a lot of failures. But as my friend said, I just don't seem to learn. The only thing the past does is make me want to forget the past. To delve deeper, I feel that the sense of shame, and inferiority is what connects me to her, my life to her life. Her circumstances are the impetus for her poems, but they are also what make her vulnerable, where her sense of shame and inferiority come from.

Perception is at stake here. Many people of her position might feel quite content and happy about their lives, and it is not hard to imagine such a life. They are young, far from home and therefore free from the control of their parents, their salary is not much, but there are things that don't cost much that they can enjoy too: eating out close to midnight at roadside food stalls, as is the custom in the south, buying cheap knickknacks and clothes in cheap shops targeting the low-income population. They can date, and if a girl ever unfortunately gets pregnant, there is no shortage of questionable small clinics touting cheap abortions. They can still be happy.

In Zheng's poems, pain is the soul of the soulless factory life. "I feel pain, therefore I am." It is a pain not belonging to only one individual but to many others, a community and culture of pain. I didn't work in a factory but what draws me into her work, the part of it I can relate to, is her feeling of not being born in the best world or the best time – that is, her existential anxiety. But Zheng found a way out. Writing poems is her escape. I am still searching for mine.

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I viewed my past with shame and sense of failure. I drifted along, not knowing what I wanted. I moved to Shenzhen (hereinafter SZ) after college, following the steps of my sister, who graduated one year earlier and was brought there by a job she found while still a student.

SZ was the first big city I ever lived in – I thought I would like it. However, as it turned out, I always felt restless in its glittering cityscape.

The city is not organic. Most of the ground surface is locked with cement, little greenery. Many Chinese people like its young and modern look. Many years later when I visited my dream city of New York for the first time, I was shocked to discover how rundown some parts of the city are, and how alike SZ's commercial pedestrian street is to Times Square, only SZ is newer. I felt dizziness and disorientation, the abstract term

“economic miracle” suddenly borne out by ironclad evidence, like an epiphany.

Everything in SZ is a put-on, a performance: shiny office buildings, boastful company profiles, intimidating job descriptions. It is picture perfect, too posh to make one feel at home. Yes, that was it: I never felt it was my home, that I could call it my city. Especially because everything there is new and therefore unestablished, the entire city is susceptible to a sense of artificialness and impermanence. While living there, I frequently changed jobs: customer service clerk, sales coordinator, production planner, more titles than I can remember. I managed to get hired at each of them by regurgitating to the recruiting manager my prepared answers to stock interview questions (such as, what qualities make you suitable for the job?) in English.

I felt like a misfit, an impostor, and was unhappy. My first job was as a customer service clerk with a medium-sized TV manufacturer. Bossy sales people dumped customer requests for repair parts to me; I forwarded the request to the factory and followed up. I tried hard to fit in: arrive before nine o'clock; wear strictly formal shirts; fake enthusiastic greetings and small talk with coworkers, and, yes, I was very eager to please, to hide my utter discomfort. Two or three months into the job, I impulsively quit, despite the kind advice of my manager, who was disgruntled about his job himself, that I wait until after the Chinese New Year holiday (which was about half a month away) so that I could get a paid holiday.

After almost eight years, I have forgotten the name of my mild manager, but can

still remember the names of those aggressive and arrogant coworkers whom I used to fear and failed to please.

Once, the company organized a get-together in a Karaoke bar. A row of obsequious pretty girls bowed to us as we entered. Our booked room was big enough, and everyone took turns singing their ordered songs using a microphone. I ordered a song too, but someone cut it off as I was singing and skipped to the next one. I felt humiliated. I said nothing.

I hid the fact that I was a smoker at work.

A college friend of mine, who went on to a prestigious graduate school after college, visited me during her winter break after I quit my job. She brought me several packets of cigarettes from Beijing. She told me later that her impression when she saw me in SZ was that I seemed to have lost some of my innocence.

The same friend said to me, “SZ’s sky is too narrow.”

At that time I was staying with my sister and her then-boyfriend, later-husband. They had both graduated from top universities and were recruited by the same big Japanese electronics company, where they met each other. Both had long been (and still are) working in big MNC’s (multinational corporations), living the model white-collar life.

One could say my sister and her boyfriend are my polar opposite. They are practical, hardworking, and thrifty. I am impractical, indolent, and unable to save money. They told me that I should not stay up late, as I would use more electricity. They are the saving type, and I, in contrast, am frequently broke. They must have increasingly felt I was a liability to them. One morning, I was penniless and asked my sister to lend me two dollars for the bus fee in order to get to work. She went into her room, perhaps to discuss my request with her boyfriend, then returned and said to me no that I had to ask my boyfriend for help.

When I mentioned to her my intention to quit my job, my sister said that whenever she felt unmotivated to go to work, she would picture paper money flying in front of her face, and it always worked. At that time, her daily salary, after graduating college only a little more than one year earlier, was close to Zheng's first monthly salary of 45 dollars.

After I quit my job, my sister hinted to me that I should pay her my share of the rent. I did, and moved out not long after that. I moved in with M, a high school friend of mine.

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SZ is nominally divided into guan-nei (inside the gates) and guan-wai (outside the

gates). “Guan” means gate in Chinese. The gates are checkpoints, like tollbooths, on the roads that go in and out. They are an hour or so out of town in both directions. There is a saying that “there is a world of difference between ‘guan-nei’ and ‘guan-wai’.” Outside the gates are more factory towns. Since housing outside the gates is significantly cheaper than inside (i.e. SZ proper), many young people, like my friend M, who work in the city, choose to live outside and take buses to commute to work.

M lived outside the gate called Mei Lin Guan. Her monthly salary was under 500 dollars; the rent for her tiny one-bedroom apartment, around 80 dollars. Her neighborhood was what is called an “urban village,” composed of crowded multi-story (usually less than nine stories and without elevators) buildings built by villagers-turned-landlords, and with narrow alleys.

Right across a street from the urban village, however, is the Four Seasons Flower Town, an upper class residential community designed by Vanke, the largest residential real estate developer in China. After M finished work, she and I would hang out in its park-like environment, maybe shop and eat there too, and then return to our plain abode before the Flower Town closed its gate.

M never asked me for rent, thereby, one could say, proving the saying “people who have the least give the most” – not that I felt I was entitled. I understood my sister’s actions, in a way; at least that is what I told myself. While living with M, I only put in applications desultorily and stayed jobless for a while.

Those days I stayed with M were among my happiest days in SZ. We were young and free. She was a customer service representative at a TV Station then, and told me that people in her profession are depression-prone given the amount of difficult customers they deal with on a daily basis and their irregular shifts. Every morning, when she left for work, she would enviously tell me that she wished she could stay at home like me, to which I would say that I wished I had a job.

M ate lots of junk food when she got off work. Maybe it made her feel better. She famously said that it was great fun eating sweet and salty food together, and taking hot food and cold drinks together, further adding that she knew her stomach was ruined.

In the night, we either went to dance in a public square in front of a shopping mall with lots of other people, or played pool, or went to a very basic bar next door to sing Karaoke. Once, we went out with a coworker of hers who lived in the same neighborhood. In between the songs I smoked. M never cared about my smoking, which I liked. Surprisingly, that night she took one herself from my packet and started smoking. I could see the astonished expression on her coworker's face. M finished the cigarette and said she didn't get why people liked smoking. I never saw her smoke a cigarette again.

Sometimes M and I went over to L's place. L was a high school classmate of ours and very close to M. She lived outside another gate at the opposite edge of the city from ours. It was more than an hour commute. L was in a relationship with a married man and

talked candidly about her abortions. She was a smoker too, and so was her “boyfriend”; but he didn’t like her smoking, so she would smoke behind his back, such as when I was there.

I have always gravitated towards people like M and L, who are non-judgmental and have interesting stories, while I have also grown increasingly distant from my sister and her boyfriend, as they have grown into one unit and are no longer distinct from each other, guarding their orthodox fortress of material values and casting suspicious eyes towards people of alternative lifestyles and lower social standing.

Judging by their standards, which seem to be in line with mainstream values, I am a failure. Sometimes I have thought so too. But I would not want to trade my life for theirs.

“Though when we’re running out of the drugs  
And the conversation’s winding away  
I wouldn’t trade one stupid decision  
For another five years of life.”

– Lyrics of the Song “All My Friends” by LCD Soundsystem

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In later years, my attempts to enter big foreign companies always failed, that is until after I was granted admission to graduate school in the US, at which point I was



hired by a MNC in the financial industry as a temp that doubled as a translator and a secretary for half a dozen foreign executives. I joked to my friends that I was a high level maid there – buying coffee and lunch for them, picking up their new visa photos, buying their business and personal trip tickets, booking and cancelling their Chinese or golf lessons, booking company cars for their client visits, maintaining their calendars, etc. etc. etc. Everyday I was like a spinning top, worried to death about tiny mistakes that might lead to disastrous consequences, for example, entering a wrong time or flight number for their flights. The whole business didn't make me happy.

It seems fair to speculate that my lack of success in finding a good job was because I didn't attend a reputable undergrad college – MNC's always favor top university graduates – but this realization came as no small shock to me. I had always considered my school record as an external thing, not something that defines who I was, therefore I kept trying and trying and trying, hoping someone could recognize my internal qualities.

Yet, it doesn't seem fair to simply blame the employers for their “superficiality”: isn't there reason to suspect that the external record is not random or isolated, but rather indicates, is caused by, or proves my internal qualities? In other words, the “wrong” of not attending a top college might well indicate something wrong with me. There are reasons why a loser is a loser.

I confess: I do internalize my failures. As I look back on my past, I see a lot of

failures, so much so that, I feel like a failure myself. Good for the companies that passed me over.

I was warned: my mother used to say when I was in high school that in ten years my close friends and I would have vastly different lives. That frightened me. My mother's prophecy did turn out to be true for my sister, but not for me with my friends. My close friends from ten years ago are still my close friends. That, at least, is a huge comfort.

We all used to be equal. We have all been through the same nine-year compulsory education. I, my sister, her boyfriend, M, L, Xiaoqiong Zheng – how our life paths diverged: How have quantitative changes led to qualitative changes?

Can we still reach out to each other? Can we still remember the time when we were kids and played together? Can we see through the appearance and see the essence of one another?

“People are strange, when you are a stranger.”

– Lyrics of the song *People are Strange* by The Doors

For the entire three years I lived in SZ, I didn't succeed once in cajoling X, who was then living in Beijing, to come down to visit me. The city did not hold enough attraction to her to warrant even one visit. I told her my anxiety. She said that one of her

friends who used to live in SZ said that thoughtful people inevitably feel anxious in SZ.

My last job there was with the SZ office of a US beauty products trading company. The SZ office is an interface between the US offices and the supplying factories in SZ's suburban areas. It receives the order forecast, then places and follows up on orders until their shipment. Mainlanders in the office work under HongKongese, who are in turn managed by Americans in the US offices. My department, Production Control, had about 13 staff members, all females of similar age, and was managed by a HongKongese. Our job was to check the orders' progress with factories frequently, with the goal of ensuring an on time delivery. It was a totally ridiculous job, as it was, of course, in the factories' interest to produce as fast as possible. And if for some reason they were late with certain orders, what could we do? Basically our job was to pester and bluff them that they must not be late, while all involved in this farce knew perfectly well that nothing would happen if they were late. As much as the factories needed foreign orders, the foreign traders needed the factories to continue supplying cheap products that they could not find anywhere else. The factories knew that they could not be fired. In the end, I think our contribution was merely to pass on the bad news from the factories to our manager. He then would use more bluffing, and to show due respect to him, the factory might agree to move up the delivery date a little bit, but not to its original date, at which point all the manager could do was pass on the bad news to the US offices.

It was a job of pretending. A nice job to plan a pregnancy around, which quite a few of my coworkers did. Indeed, at one point there were four of them at different stages

of pregnancy. It was quite something; a HongKongese manager from another department joked that our department had a flourishing population.

I've always dreaded being surrounded by traditional women. The girls hired to do the job that we did were generally gentle and quiet. During lunch breaks, they were quietly eating most of the time. But there was one exception – Z. Z was the most unconventional girl I had ever seen, and she spoke fluent English. On a typical Friday, she went clubbing, got drunk, and often “got laid” by a foreigner too – all of which she shared with us as fresh news over lunch break on Monday. The other girls only listened with amusement and refrained from making any comment.

I, on the other hand, immediately struck up a friendship with Z. I was scorched in a desert of people living muted lives. Z was a refreshing relief.

On the night of the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, the two of us, instead of going home early to watch the ceremony on TV like everyone else, decided to eat out. The streets were eerily empty, and there was a kind of euphoria in the air. We entered an empty restaurant, where all the service staff gathered around the TV. They turned their heads to look at us in disbelief, as if we were aliens from outer space.

As one critic said of the two realities – the mainstream narrative of a fast modernizing China and the “other China” in Zheng’s writing – the “other China” is closer to the lives and emotions of a large number of individuals and has a greater authenticity

for the individual. As for myself, I have never been able to buy into the official version of reality that “the nation is prosperous and the people are strong and powerful.” In fact, I am disillusioned. In the same year as the China Olympics, many ordinary people who invested their life savings in stock market funds suffered great losses, including my mother, who lost more than one fourth of her life savings. That year, inflation also began to pick up. Working class people, including myself, increasingly felt squeezed. All the money in the country seemed to have been sucked into a mysterious black hole. Maybe some of it was used on the Olympics spectacle. China, it seems to me, is a country that cares more about its image than its citizens’ lives.

Another Monday, Z said she didn’t bring lunch, so we went to a restaurant downstairs for lunch. She told me that she had “a threesome” over the weekend. She said it wasn’t great. I inquired further and she said, “why don’t try yourself to find out?” – cutting me short. I realized then that Z wasn’t always sure of what she was doing.

Before long, Z quit the job and decided to go backpacking in South East Asia. She asked me to go with her, but I hesitated. After she left, I had nothing to look forward to during lunch break anymore. I stopped having lunch with the other girls. I could not bear listening to their vacuous chit-chat about husbands and boyfriends, as if there was nothing else that interested them in their lives. I would go out, eat and smoke by myself.

Who are the prey of our times  
– Lyrics of the Song “Warring Knight” by Jay Chou

That was my last job in SZ, still feeling like I was hanging on to the bottom rung of the career ladder. I pretended to be sweet and sickened myself to death. When I read a New Yorker article in which a woman said that she became a stripper because she was tired of being an office secretary distributing donuts every morning, I understood exactly what she meant.

Not long after, I moved to Beijing, telling my college friend that I hated it in SZ, hated the whole manufacturing industry, one of the three pillars of China's booming economy, because its jobs were primitive and soul-sucking.

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“China's regime retains authority by means of [...] performance-based legitimacy” says Roskin (2009, 426). Since the introduction of reform and opening up 36 years ago, “GDP growth averaging about 10 percent a year has lifted more than 500 million people out of poverty” (The World Bank). Although someone would argue that the regime does not lift the people out of poverty, people lift themselves out of poverty, that is not the point here. The point is that the regime's single-minded focus on economic growth and not on other aspects of development, such as social development; on the macro-level, not on the individual; on the positives, ignoring the negatives.

The regime shapes and manipulates a materialistic culture where money is the overwhelming, if not exclusive, concern and value. Using this measurement, we are

living in a flourishing age, a controlled environment, like that depicted in the 1998 film “The Truman Show.”

Zheng’s writing brings a different side of the story into the picture. She focuses on feelings and individuals, and does not sugarcoat the harsher realities. There is bitterness in her writing, towards her physical injury, her ill treatment in particular, and the cold, inhumane, iron-like life of migrant factory workers in general. Yet, it would be a mistake to view her writing as a text relevant only for factory life in China, as her existential anxiety is transcendent and universal. People of different circumstances should be able to relate to her too. The deeper dimensions of her writing are not political, but intellectual; not practical, but spiritual; not instrumental, but poetical.

As Zheng writes in *Iron*: “The life of a migrant worker is like acid rain itself, slowly eroding our body, soul, ideals, dreams.” Some workers might be silently enduring the hardship, some become numb and resigned, and still others might not feel anything, as long as they get paid at the end of the day.

In my parallel world to Zheng’s, I was working similarly mechanical, monotonous and repetitive jobs. I couldn’t stay long with any of them. My ex-boyfriend used to ask me whether I would have stayed longer at those jobs if the pay had been much higher. I think my impulse to not suffer trumped any other concerns. When I was working for the US trading company doing the job that made no sense to me, seeing my female coworkers content and treating the job as a home base for motherhood planning, I

always wondered how they could tolerate that kind of life. How could they be so easily bribed by what the job paid for the numbing work it entailed? They appeared so content with the comfort of the job, like a frog in slowly boiling water. Perhaps comfort was all they wanted, and they did not have any impractical “ideals, dreams.” They did not have warmth or provide illumination for me. We looked at each other with mutual mistrust.

As Richard Swift comments in his essay “Whose Miracle?”, “Deng’s bet was that the desire for reform could be bought off with economic prosperity.<sup>5</sup> This has been partially successful, at least with the millions of fashion-conscious (but apolitical) consumers that now make up the urban middle-classes of Shanghai and Canton. But for the migrant workers who are the fuel of China’s economic miracle the trade-off is not so clear.”

I think that Deng was very smart. Economic prosperity, materialistic life is like a pot of tepid water in which the middle-class or middle-class-to-be are slowly cooked. Their spirit is dead. In the single-minded pursuit of material wealth, people like my sister seem to have developed a hardened soul. Nothing without money-making prospects is deemed as worthy.

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5. “Deng” refers to Xiaoping Deng, leader" of China from 1978 to 1992, whose “Reform and Opening-up” policy led China towards a market economy.



Zheng, by comparison, is poor financially, but rich spiritually. As I hope that my personal experiences helped illustrate, her words do not apply only to the financially impoverished and restricted lives of factory workers but to the spiritually impoverished and limited lives of China's corporate class of young people as well. In other words, her work speaks not just to the life of a factory worker in China but to the larger issue of living in China now, the spiritual as well as literal poverty.

In SZ, my friend Z initiated me into a western-inspired lifestyle: bold, non-hypocritical, and refreshing. I went clubbing with her and was amazed to see her chatting up foreigners with great ease. After this, I began to read English avidly and exclusively. When I moved to Beijing from SZ, I became a translator. I knew then that I wanted to go abroad. Similar to Zheng, who saw her poems on paper as her real home, the English speaking world has become my soul asylum. Going there, to me, was like the call of destiny.

I have always had a hard time identifying myself as a teacher or a translator. In the end, those are external categories that do not match my internal life. I fear the word “professional.” One trains to become a kind of professional of their choosing, like my college classmates who chose to become teachers, and my sister who chose the nine-to-five life in a corporate giant. They found their place in the world. They work the career they wanted. That is why they are happy. While Zheng was a factory work professional, she had a double identity as a writer, an identity unknown to her fellow workers. She was like an impostor.

In many ways, I have felt like an impostor myself. I resisted becoming a professional and tried to become one at the same time. I see the urban middle-class' world, where my sister belongs, and I tried to edge into that world, but somehow it rejected me, and I rejected it too. A sense of inferiority, however, lingered.

After recently hitting the age of thirty, and having lived in the US for one and half years, something magical is gradually happening. I am discovering that I am able to live a more authentic life. I do not hush up my past; I try to follow my heart, rather than living by external standards. The endeavor to live a fully authentic life perhaps is endless. I am ready to be courageous again, something that I had lost or forgotten in previous years, as I tried in vain to conform to my perceived social norms and definitions of a successful life.

I am bound by my experiences, experiences that are waiting for me to change my perspective on, and to set myself free from the shame associated with them. My experiences are related to different stages, from senior high school, to college, to my early work years. A pattern has surfaced: in each stage I seemed to be in opposition to a group whose values I did not follow, a group that I felt were the majority, the mainstream. As a factory worker poet and writer, Zheng has an interesting relationship with the mainstream too. This is what makes me relate to her: her strong individuality.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning Indian-American author Jhumpa Lahiri wrote in a

2011 essay that “For me, the act of reading was one of discovery in the most basic sense—the discovery of a culture that was foreign to my parents. I began to defy them in this way, and to understand, from books, certain things that they didn’t know... And so I felt not only that I was trespassing but also that I was, in some sense, betraying the people who were raising me.”

She further writes, “For though they had created me, and reared me, and lived with me day after day, I knew that I was a stranger to them, an American child.”

Around five years ago, I began my exploration of the English-speaking world by reading English exclusively. I had the same sense of trespassing and betrayal experienced by Jhumpa Lahiri. For me, the English language is not a tool or an instrument, but the answer to my search for an identity, for a home; just as Zheng “saw those poems on paper as [her] real home.” Writing sets Zheng free from her mundane factory life, a life that interestingly she chose to continue living when she had a chance to leave it behind after she achieved fame. As I move further and further away from my past in time and space, it does not seem to be fading away, but instead coming back to me with better clarity. The life I used to live resides in my memory, and just like the life thousands of migrant workers continue living in Zheng’s writing; it won’t be forgotten.

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